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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to determine the age at which preschool children acquire rigid sex role stereotypes. A total of 48 3- to 5-year-olds in three day care centers participated in the study. A 10-item questionnaire was administered to each child individually in a location separated from the other children but not out of the day care center. The first two questions were directed at whether the children thought boys could play with dolls and girls could play with trucks. The next seven questions pertained to sex role stereotypes of adults and their work. The 10th question was, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" In this study, a high number of affirmative responses was taken to imply an absence of sex role stereotypes while a high score of negative replies was taken to signify a rigid sex role concept. In the 4- and 5-year-old age group only slightly over half of the responses were affirmative while among 3-year-olds 86 percent of the answers were positive. On question 10, there was no significant difference between the variety of choices of males and females. It was concluded that the majority of 4- and 5-year-olds have begun to form more rigid sex role stereotypes in comparison with 3-year-old children who still show flexible sex role concepts. (JMB)

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# SURVEY OF SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES

# IN

# PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

Summer 1975

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PS008396

# SURVEY OF SEX ROLE STEREOTYPES IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN *

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Television, newspapers, magazines, books and other media have currently focused on the right of an individual to do his/her own "thing." Government at every level and the judicial system are actively involved with the struggle of changing societal values and attitudes. It is unlawful for institutions to practice discrimination on the basis of color, creed, national origin, race, religion, and/or sex. Stereotypes about groups of people based on their color, creed, national origin, race, religion or sex can affect how a person sees himself and consequently how other people react to him. Stereotypes can lead to discrimination and thus present an individual from achieving personal ambitions and goals.

This research study is involved specifically with sex role stereotypes and the reversal of male and female roles in the home, the community and in the labor force. In the American culture it has long been the prevalent belief that women were best suited to take care of the home and family. The nurturing role of a female was distinct in such occupations as nursing and teaching. The skills of organizing, cleaning, decorating were found in the womanly chores of housekeeping, interior decorating and secretarial work. The male was to be assertive and lead the family by securing work in the labor force to provide for his family. Men were to be the leaders in business, in government, in industry. Jobs like fireman and policeman connotate what gender is expected. This describes the sex role stereotypes that children are exposed to from birth. Stereotypes can be formed at an early age and may persist throughout a lifetime.

Today, however, roles that were once designated as male or female are now becoming open to free choice. Men are considering alternative occupations such as airline steward or nursery school teacher that were once predominantly female. Likewise, women are free to choose such previously male-dominated vocations as truck driver or construction worker. Are sex roles becoming less stereotyped? Is this having a measurable effect on our young children in the preschool population? This study surveyed a sample of preschool children in a metropolitan area concerning sex role stereotypes to determine if their responses are reflecting any changes.

Hypotheses:

1. The majority of preschool children will have begun to form sex role stereotypes by the ages of four and five years.
2. Three-year-old preschool children will not demonstrate the formation of rigid sex role stereotypes.
3. There will be no difference between preschool boys and girls in their responses to sex stereotype questions.

* This research was funded by a University of Utah Faculty Summer Research Grant for 1975.

## II. METHOD OF PROCEDURE

Three day care centers located in Salt Lake City, Utah were chosen as sites for the research because of their availability and willingness to cooperate with the testing. Parental and/or guardian consent forms (see Appendices B, C, D) were solicited from all parents with children from ages three years to five years as of July 1, 1975. The sample consisted of all boys and girls between the ages of three and five years who were attending the day care facility in the summer of 1975 and whose parents gave consent. There were a few parents who elected not to have their children participate.

One female examiner, attractive and in her early twenties, administered all of the questionnaire sheets to the preschool children. Before the research began she spent time in each of the three facilities communicating and establishing rapport with the children so that they would be more receptive. The survey (see Appendix A) was given by the examiner to each child individually in the day care center in a location separated from the other children but not out of the facility. The responses were recorded on individual score sheets during the interview. All subjects and their responses were kept anonymous.

The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of nine objective questions to be answered "yes", "no" or "no response." The first two questions were directed personally at the subject in his present milieu. If a child did not have a rigid stereotype about the sex roles of boys and girls it was assumed that he would answer positively that boys can play with dolls and girls can play with trucks. The next seven questions pertained to sex role stereotypes of adults and their work. Positive answers could denote that the subject had been exposed to people in these roles. It could also indicate flexible attitudes and values had been advocated and reinforced in his primary milieu. The last question was subjective and was intended to discern what options subjects considered available to them. If the subject did not feel the pressures of a rigid stereotype he or she might be inclined to express more freedom of choice in the selection of an occupation. For the purposes of this study a high number of affirmative responses implied no sex role stereotypes while a high score of negative replies signified a rigid sex role concept.

## III. PILOT STUDY

The pilot study was conducted at the Life Study Laboratory located in the University of Utah College of Nursing. Faculty members from the preschool staff initiated some curricula and investigation dealing with sex role stereotypes. Presentations of curricula were in the form of stories and appropriate visitors. A male nurse and female policeman were invited to talk with the children. Literature such as William's Doll, Moms at Work, My Doctor and Ferdinand were read and discussed with the preschool children. The sample for the pilot study consisted of forty-eight preschool subjects, ages three to five years, who attended the Life Study Laboratory Preschool program in 1975. One of the preschool teachers, a female in her early twenties, administered the questionnaire. Each subject was surveyed individually in the Life Study Laboratory during free play.

The results of the pilot study revealed that most of the children were reacting positively to the survey questions. Seventy-two percent of all the female subjects and seventy-eight percent of all male subjects responded with "yes" answers

(see Table I). Over two-thirds of the four-year-olds and five-year-olds answered affirmatively which suggests a flexible concept of sex roles among these two age groups. Several factors could be involved in the high ninety-two percent positive replies of the three-year-old group. Because they are so young, the three-year-old subjects may not as yet have developed firm personal sex role identities. In addition, the motivation of some children to try to please the examiner and the assumption that each child could comprehend the questions were other factors effecting the results. Moreover, because the survey was not taken before and after the introduction of the curricular, there cannot be any assurance that the positive results were indicative of successful lesson presentations at the preschool or that values taught in the home encouraged the less rigid sex role stereotypes.

## IV. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall every total survey score showed a higher percentage of the "yes" answers indicating more flexible sex role responses than rigid stereotype answers (refer to Graph I). Sixty-six percent of the total group of preschoolers gave positive replies. In the four- and five-year-old age groups only slightly over half of the responses were affirmative while eighty-six percent of the three-year-old group gave positive answers (see Table II). To evaluate whether there was a significant difference between the age groups, the chi-square test was utilized because of the independence of categorical variables. Since the chi-square value was greater than that required for significance at the 0.005 level, * the null hypothesis denoting no difference between age groups must be rejected. The five-year-old group showed a meaningful preference for negative stereotyped answers in comparison with the three-year-old group. The four-year-old group in contrast with the three-year-old group also exhibited a significant difference at the same level of 0.0005. Therefore, we may conclude that the majority of preschool children, ages four and five, have begun to form more rigid sex role stereotypes in comparison with the three-year-old children who still show flexible sex role concepts.

In comparing male subjects with female subjects, the chi-square value is less than required for significance at the 0.05 level (see Table III). Consequently, we must accept the null hypothesis that there is no variance between preschool boys and girls in their responses to sex role questions.

On the survey the subjective question number ten ("What do you want to be when you grow up?") provided some pertinent data (see Table IV). There was no significent difference between the variety of choices of males and females. Both groups responded with a wide diversity of possibilities. Out of a feasible sixty answers, the females selected twenty-three choices; with a possible fifty different replies, the males specified seventeen choices. However, when comparing the reversal of roles selected by males and females, little girls selected more male stereotyped careers than little boys selected female stereotyped careers. Utilizing the chi-square test, the value of chi-square was greater than that required for significance at the 0.05 level * indicating little girls responded with a significantly higher number of male-dominated roles.

* one-tailed test; degree of freedom = 1

The gestalt of society's sex role concept may be granting more freedom and diversity to females than males. This is also reflected in the first two questions on the survey. A girl playing with a truck is slightly more acceptable than a boy playing with a doll (see Table III). One significant change for the male may be reflected in question number nine ("Can men be cooks and cook food?") This question received the highest percentage of "yes" responses, indicating perhaps that more and more men are cooking the meals or helping to prepare the meals in the home.

## V. DISCUSSION

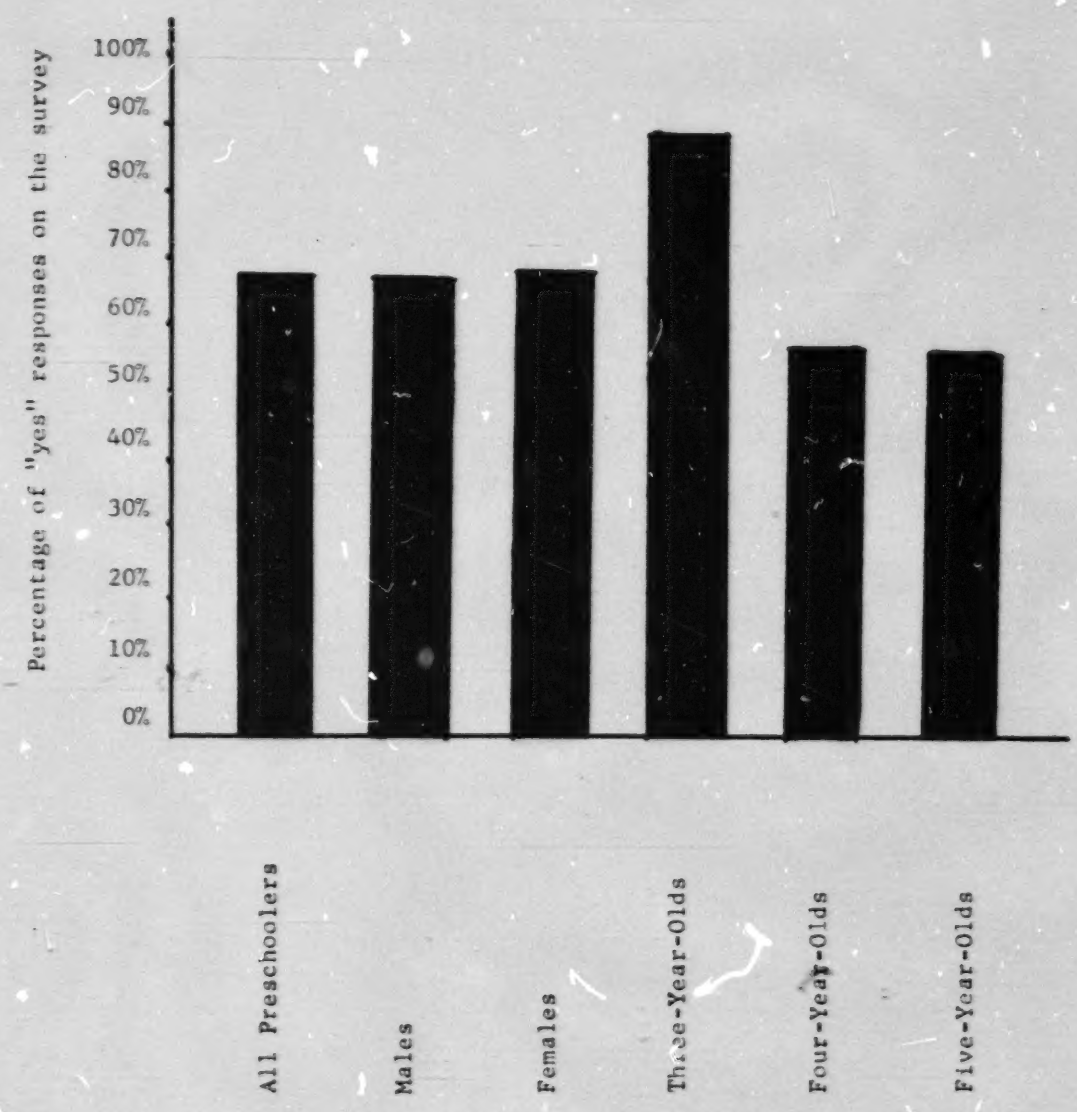
We are not advocating a reversal of sex roles, only that individual people have the freedom to choose and not be discriminated against because of stereotypes about sexual roles.

As this survey indicates, children begin to form stereotypes at an early age. It is extremely important for a young child to develop a strong personal sex role identity; however, in our society today, sex roles are becoming more flexible. Children should be exposed to a variety of careers and be allowed to experiment with these roles in their play. Too many times children are humiliated or forced to accept a stereotype imposed by society. While we don't want to confuse the little boy in the survey who wanted to be a mommy, we can help him understand his role as a future daddy by giving him a doll that he can hug and love, as he will his own little baby some day. Likewise, we don't want to discourage the little girl who wants to be an airplane pilot by taking away her plane and giving her a baby doll.

The data gathered in this research project has stimulated many ideas for other research. There is some indication that perhaps children who are just developing their personal sex role identity may overlearn; and then as they get older they may modify their original concept. Four years of age seems to be the peak age when a child overlearns stereotypes only to have them modified as he approaches five years of age. It would be extremely interesting to do a longitudinal study on the same group of children from the age of three years until they reach six years. The same questionnaire could be given each year and then the answers of each subject could be compared at each age level. It would also be interesting to gather some cognitive data concerning the child's perception of why he or she could or could not be in a certain occupation or how he or she would describe that career role. This type of information would be very helpful for anyone involved in child development.

GRAPH I

COMPARISON OF "YES" RESPONSES FROM ALL GROUPS INDICATING FLEXIBLE SEX ROLE CONCEPTS



## TABLE I

PILOT STUDY (48 Subjects: 24 Female and 24 Male)

| | THREE-YEAR-OLDS 15 S. * | | FOUR-YEAR-OLDS 20 S. | | FIVE-YEAR-OLDS 13 S. | | FEMALES 24 S. | | MALES 24 S. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO |
| 1. Can a boy play with a doll? | 13 | 2 | 12 | 8 | 3 | 10 | 11 | 13 | 17 | 7 |
| 2. Can a girl play with a truck? | 13 | 2 | 10 | 10 | 4 | 9 | 11 | 13 | 16 | 8 |
| 3. Can a lady be a doctor? | 14 | 1 | 11 | 9 | 4 | 9 | 12 | 12 | 17 | 7 |
| 4. Can a man be a nurse? | 15 | | 12 | 8 | 10 | 3 | 18 | 6 | 19 | 5 |
| 5. Can a lady be a dentist? | 15 | | 16 | 4 | 11 | 2 | 21 | 3 | 21 | 3 |
| 6. Can ladies be firemen? | 15 | | 14 | 6 | 13 | | 21 | 3 | 21 | 3 |
| 7. Can men be teachers? | 14 | 1 | 15 | 5 | 13 | | 22 | 2 | 20 | 4 |
| 8. Can ladies be policemen? | 12 | 3 | 16 | 4 | 12 | 1 | 21 | 3 | 19 | 5 |
| 9. Can men be cooks? | 13 | 2 | 14 | 6 | 11 | 2 | 19 | 5 | 19 | 5 |
| TOTAL POSSIBLE RESPONSES | 135 | | 180 | | 117 | | 216 | | 216 | |
| TOTAL RESPONSES | 124 | 11 | 120 | 60 | 81 | 36 | 156 | 60 | 169 | 47 |
| PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POSSIBLE | 92% | 8% | 66 2/3% | 33 1/3% | 69% | 31% | 72% | 28% | 78% | 22% |

10. What would you like to be when you grow up?

| THREE-YEAR-OLDS (15 S.) Males | THREE-YEAR-OLDS (15 S.) Females | FOUR-YEAR-OLDS (20 S.) Males | FOUR-YEAR-OLDS (20 S.) Females | FIVE-YEAR-OLDS (13 S.) Males | FIVE-YEAR-OLDS (13 S.) Females |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| cowboy<br>daddy<br>dentist<br>doctor<br>don't know<br>fireman<br>sheriff | big big girl<br>3 don't know<br>fireman<br>nurse<br>policeman<br>princess | dentist<br>3 firemen<br>giant<br>2 policemen<br>superman<br>truck man<br>working man with bulldozer | doctor<br>2 don't know<br>drum player<br>fireman<br>mommy<br>movie star<br>nurse<br>sister | 2 doctors<br>fireman<br>fireman OR plumber OR artist<br>policeman OR fireman OR Dr. of animals | acrobat in circus<br>don't know<br>2 mothers<br>2 nurses<br>policeman |

* S. = Subjects

TABLE II

COMPARISON OF THE THREE AGE GROUPS

| | THREE-YEAR-OLDS (36 S.)* | | FOUR-YEAR-OLDS (45 S.) | | FIVE-YEAR-OLDS (29 S) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO |
| 1. Can a boy play with a doll? | 25 | 11 | 18 | 27 | 10 | 19 |
| 2. Can a girl play with a truck? | 31 | 5 | 19 | 26 | 12 | 17 |
| 3. Can a lady be a doctor? | 29 | 7 | 32 | 13 | 21 | 8 |
| 4. Can a man be a nurse? | 31 | 5 | 23 | 24 | 10 | 19 |
| 5. Can a lady be a dentist? | 34 | 2 | 27 | 18 | 17 | 12 |
| 6. Can ladies be firemen? | 32 | 4 | 20 | 25 | 9 | 20 |
| 7. Can men be teachers? | 32 | 4 | 25 | 20 | 24 | 5 |
| 8. Can ladies be policemen? | 31 | 5 | 27 | 18 | 19 | 10 |
| 9. Can men be cooks? | 33 | 3 | 38 | 7 | 22 | 7 |
| TOTAL POSSIBLE RESPONSES | 324 | | 405 | | 261 | |
| TOTAL RESPONSES | 278 | 46 | 227 | 178 | 144 | 117 |
| PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POSSIBLE | 86% | 14% | 56% | 44% | 55% | 45% |

* S. = Subjects

TABLE III

COMPARISON OF MALES, FEMALES AND ALL PRESCHOOLERS

| | FEMALES (60 S.) * | | MALES (50 S.) | | ALL PRESCHOOLERS (110S) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | YES | NO | YES | NO | YES | NO |
| 1. Can a boy play with a doll? | 30 | 30 | 23 | 27 | 53 (48%) | 57 (52%) |
| 2. Can a girl play with a truck? | 33 | 27 | 29 | 21 | 62 (56%) | 48 (44%) |
| 3. Can a lady be a doctor? | 41 | 19 | 44 | 9 | 82 (75%) | 28 (25%) |
| 4. Can a man be a nurse? | 33 | 27 | 29 | 21 | 62 (56%) | 48 (44%) |
| 5. Can a lady be a dentist? | 45 | 15 | 33 | 17 | 78 (71%) | 32 (29%) |
| 6. Can ladies be firemen? | 35 | 25 | 26 | 24 | 61 (55%) | 49 (45%) |
| 7. Can men be teachers? | 46 | 14 | 35 | 15 | 81 (74%) | 29 (26%) |
| 8. Can ladies be policemen? | 43 | 17 | 34 | 16 | 77 (70%) | 33 (30%) |
| 9. Can men be cooks? | 49 | 11 | 44 | 6 | 93 (85%) | 17 (15%) |
| TOTAL POSSIBLE RESPONSES | 540 | | 450 | | 990 | |
| TOTAL RESPONSES | 355 | 185 | 294 | 156 | 649 | 341 |
| PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL POSSIBLE | 66% | 34% | 65% | 35% | 66% | 34% |

* S. = Subjects

TABLE IV

10. What do you want to be when you grow up?

| FEMALES | | MALES | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Airplane Pilot | 2 | Airplane Pilots |
| | | | Army Chopter Pilot |
| | Baker | | Army man |
| 3 | Ballerinas | | |
| | Belly Dancer (jelly bean girl) | | Butterfly |
| | Bicyclist | | |
| | | 2 | Daddies |
| | Cowgirl | | Dentist |
| 5 | Dancers | 3 | Doctors |
| | Dentist | | Elephant |
| 6 | Doctors | | |
| | | 18 | Firemen |
| 2 | Firemen | | Firemen or Marine |
| | Fireman girl | | |
| | Girl Scout | | Helicopter Pilot |
| | Ghost | | Hotel Manager |
| | Horse Keeper (lady that takes care of horses) | 2 | Mailmen |
| | | | Mommy |
| | Lion Tamer | 10 | Policemen |
| 8 | Mommies | | Santa Claus |
| 12 | Nurses | 2 | Spidermen |
| | Play with dolls | 1 | No opinion or didn't know |
| | Policeman | | |
| | Policewoman | | |
| | Queen | | |
| 4 | Teachers | | |
| | Waitress | | |
| 4 | No opinions or didn't know | | |

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## APPENDIX A

(SAMPLE OF SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE)

Sex: _____

Age: _____

Facility: _____

| | Yes | No | No Comment |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Can a boy play with a doll? | | | |
| 2. Can a girl play with a truck? | | | |
| 3. Can a lady be a doctor? | | | |
| 4. Can a man be a nurse? | | | |
| 5. Can a lady be a dentist? | | | |
| 6. Can ladies be firemen? | | | |
| 7. Can men be teachers? | | | |
| 8. Can ladies be policemen? | | | |
| 9. Can men be cooks? | | | |
| 10. What would you like to be when you grow up? _____ | | | |

APPENDIX B

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

SUMMER RESEARCH GRANT STUDY

AFTON NISSON at Kiddieville

has given us permission to use this preschool facility for a University of Utah Summer Research Grant Project. Please give your written consent allowing us to ask your child a few short questions concerning career stereotypes. All answers will be kept anonymous.

I, the undersigned, give permission to Joleen Harwood to interview my child concerning career stereotypes.

PARENT or GUARDIAN _____

Date _____

If you have any questions, contact:

| | |
|---|---|
| Joleen Harwood | 295-3185 |
| Candace Tait | 292-7323 |
| Sandra Lizak | 272-6603 |

APPENDIX C

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

SUMMER RESEARCH GRANT STUDY

PAUL STEINFELDT at CASTLE KINDERGARTEN

has given us permission to use this preschool facility for a University of Utah Summer Research Grant Project. Please give your written consent allowing us to ask your child a few short questions concerning career stereotypes. All answers will be kept anonymous.

I, the undersigned, give permission to Joleen Harwood to interview my child concerning career stereotypes.

PARENT or GUARDIAN _____

Date _____

If you have any questions, contact:

| | |
|---|---|
| Joleen Harwood | 295-3185 |
| Candace Tait | 292-7323 |
| Sandra Lizak | 272-6603 |

## APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
SUMMER RESEARCH GRANT STUDY

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CENTER has given its permission to use this preschool facility for a University of Utah Summer Research Grant Project. Please give your written consent allowing us to ask your child a few short questions concerning career stereotypes. All answers will be kept anonymous. Children will be surveyed at the facility during the regular program.

I, the undersigned, give permission to Joleen Harood to interview my child concerning career stereotypes.

PARENT or GUARDIAN _____

Date _____

If you have any questions, contact:

| | |
|---|---|
| Joleen Harwood | 295-3185 |
| Candace Tait | 292-7323 |
| Sandra Lizak | 272-6603 |